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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000699

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: [KCRM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: A/S WELCH VISITS FORMER PRESIDENT
GEMAYEL

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a May 16 meeting with visiting NEA A/S Welch and the Ambassador, former President Amine Gemayel stressed the need for a successful UN Security Council vote to establish the tribunal to try suspects in the death of former Prime Minister Hariri. Gemayel also hopes for a strongly-worded report by Head of the UN International Independent Investigation into Hariri's death (UNIIIC) Serge Brammertz. Gemayel asserted that both steps would strengthen the 14 March coalition in the lead-up to presidential elections in the fall and enable the Lebanese Government to negotiate with Syria in the future from a position of strength. Regarding presidential hopeful Michel Aoun, Gemayel said that Aoun's popular support among Christians is waning. Gemayel has begun several projects -- including the rehabilitation of his political party and the founding of a center for dialogue -- that he hopes will increase his family's political strength. Subsequently, we have explored with Gemayel the idea of traveling to Qatar to help push for tribunal approval. End Summary.

STRENGTHEN THE 14 MARCH COALITION

2. (C) Former President Amine Gemayel, father of slain Minister of Industry Pierre Gemayel, stressed the importance of action on the Hariri tribunal to bolster his 14 March Coalition. Also present at the meeting were Gemayel's youngest son Sami; advisor and professor of political science at the Lebanese American University Dr. Salim Sayegh; and Prime Minister Siniora's chief advisor, Ambassador Mohamed Chatah. Gemayel asserted that, by itself, the tribunal is not important; however, the moral impact in Lebanon of its establishment and the boost it would provide to UNIIIC investigator Serge Brammertz's case are vital to the March 14 coalition. The timely establishment of the tribunal would encourage Brammertz to deliver a report in June "with muscle," according to Gemayel, and would send a clear sign to the opposition. Such resolve would change the Lebanese political dynamic in March 14's favor. These steps would enable the alliance to display strength, cohesion, and clear policy goals.

3. (C) Gemayel argued that bolstering the March 14 coalition would protect Lebanese principles and enable the Lebanese Government to establish a future dialogue with Syria, and

possibly Iran, from a position of strength. Gemayel assessed that "at a certain stage" with a strong March 14 Coalition, dialogue with Damascus and Tehran would be a positive step. He claimed that once Syria "feels the heat" from the Hariri tribunal, Damascus would willingly approach the Lebanese for dialogue.

BUT FIRST, THE PRESIDENCY

¶4. (C) To usher in what Gemayel referred to as a "new era" of reform and dialogue, Lebanon first needs to elect a strong and independent president. Gemayel asserted that Lebanon needs a credible and committed candidate who will follow through on all UN resolutions regarding Lebanon, support sovereignty, defend the country's independence, and partner with the international community. The next president should build consensus and support transparency -- steps that Gemayel suggested cannot be taken until after the elections.

DIMINISHING SUPPORT FOR THE GENERAL

¶5. (C) Gemayel assessed that Aoun's "unbelievable" alliance with Hizballah had damaged the General's popular support among Christians in Lebanon. While Aoun could formerly claim 70 percent of Christian support, he now only held about 30 percent of the Christian population, mainly preserving the backing of his "hard core" followers. Gemayel commented wryly that pro-Syrian Christians, who adamantly opposed Aoun before his departure to Paris, now represent a large part of the General's support base. Ambassador Chatah added that Christians who believe that Lebanese Sunnis seek to transform the country into a Sunni Arab nation often ally with Aoun; Aoun has successfully marketed the claim that the Christians

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are subservient to Muslims in the March 14 Coalition.

¶6. (C) According to Gemayel, Aoun's move towards an alliance with Hizballah began when he allowed Syria to engineer his return to Lebanon in 2005 after 15 years of exile in Paris. The relationship continues now because Aoun has gotten too close to Hizballah's ideas and has become hostage to the group. Chatah explained that some of Aoun's followers do question his call for popular elections but others believe the General could actually win such a vote, particularly with Shia support. Aoun sent his close advisors and loyal National Assembly members to assure Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) followers that the General's alliance with Hizballah was only a tactical move to give him space to maneuver, and was not a transformation of Aounist ideals. However, Chatah offered that the absence of large FPM crowds at the "tent city" in downtown Beirut suggests Aoun's followers realize they cannot form an integrated alliance with Hizballah.

¶7. (C) On Aoun's relationship with Syria and Iran, Gemayel asserted that the secret procession of Lebanese leaders to Damascus continues. He was convinced that Aoun's followers travel to Syria "daily or weekly," but he has seen signals that the Syrians do not fully trust the General. Gemayel theorized that Syrian mistrust could stem from Aoun's statements regarding his "merely tactical" relationship with Hizballah. On Tehran, Gemayel highlighted Iranian financial support sent directly to Aoun, particularly during the summer war. External financial support for Aoun remains strong.

PLANNING FOR FAMILY'S POLITICAL FUTURE

¶8. (C) Gemayel's thoughts are not fully occupied by Lebanon's current impasse, however, as the former President is planning both for the reincarnation of his political party and the establishment of a center to promote dialogue among Lebanese sects. On rebuilding his political party, Gemayel said that his son Pierre, recently assassinated, had created a strong

momentum and the elder Gemayel and youngest son, Sami, hoped to build on Pierre's work. Additionally, the former president plans to establish a center for dialogue in Lebanon that would serve as a neutral space for discussions and conflict resolution among sects. He has discussed the project with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon.

POSSIBILITY OF QATAR TRIP TO PUSH TRIBUNAL

¶9. (C) In talking of Iran with A/S Welch, Gemayel mentioned in passing that he has good relations with the Qataris. Following up on that conversation, the Ambassador asked Gemayel on 5/17 whether he would be interested in traveling to Qatar in hopes of helping to persuade the Qataris to use their UNSC vote in favor of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

Gemayel can speak with authority, as a former president and as the father of one of the victims. Gemayel readily agreed, on the condition that the Hariri family and the Saudi government not object. Saad Hariri has already conveyed to us his support for such a trip, and the Ambassador will brief Saudi Ambassador Khoja on 5/19.

¶10. (U) This message has not been cleared by A/S Welch.
FELTMAN